

WATER is a compelling feature in any garden layout. Fountains attract the eye and the ear as they glitter and splash. Lakes make us stop and gaze at their reflections and keep us entertained with the activities of the wildlife on and in them. Watercourses flowing by speak of ancient sites and boundaries, and make us wonder about their changing levels in different seasons. In a garden called Millwater, all these ideas are inevitably brought together, with all their attractions and challenges.

The house and garden here are the latest in many incarnations over the years. The ancient mill race that curves around the northern end of the garden, cutting a deep channel, is a loop flowing out of, and returning to, the River Wey. It rises and falls in response to rainfall levels and feeds the millpond in the outer part of the garden. One of its great benefits for the owners, Jonathan and Gail Hughes-Morgan, is the little colony of kingfishers that flits along its banks, one of the sights of the countryside.

Water is a compelling feature: fountains attract the eye, lakes make us stop and gaze

The present garden layout is very modern, formed since 2009 in a close collaboration between the owners and the designers, Ian Smith and Debbie Roberts of Acres Wild. Between them, they have shuffled the pack of water features, turning an old swimming pool, for instance, into something altogether more elegant, and subdividing the space into a series of richly planted enclosures, each leading into the next and generating a sequence of different moods. Framework planting of older ornamental trees has been carefully retained and merged into the new design, so that it's sometimes pleasantly hard to tell where the line has been drawn.

The house has been modified along the same lines of thinking. Walking out from the kitchen extension, cunningly

Mirror, mirror: autumn's clear light casts reflections across the lake

Where mill waters run deep

Millwater, Ripley, Surrey

A handy loop in the River Wey brings an animated and harmonious extra dimension to a recently made garden of great seasonal beauty, finds Steven Desmond

Photographs by Marianne Majerus





woven into the brick fabric of the older house, we step onto a paved terrace of water-worn stone around a centre-piece of neatly inlaid radiating brick, an obvious nod to the Arts-and-Crafts style of Surrey a century ago.

The centre line—for all here is regular—continues to the rectangular pool of which we spoke a moment ago. This, as we might expect, is regularly planted with irises along its margins and waterlilies down the middle, with an extra visual treat in the form of an outer ‘frame’ of flat-growing thyme, cool and grey at all times and flushed with smoky pink in summer. This sort of continuous

ribbon of planting betrays the hand of the confident professional.

This pool, the focal point of the whole layout, is seated on a level lawn, a thoroughly English approach to such a space, and the lawn is then framed in mixed shrub and herbaceous planting. Again, the comfortable scale of the planting, in big drifts, shows the professional’s willingness to invest in a solid fabric where often the amateur feels the need to vary the plot as much as possible. The result is a quietly expansive feel, with the scheme rising behind to a noble backdrop of big ornamental trees that must be survivors from an earlier layout, wisely retained

Top and above: **The pool is surrounded by a frame of flat-growing thyme, which is spreading over the paving. It is planted with irises along its margins and with waterlilies down the middle**

and stitched into the present scheme to give the very sense of instant maturity many owners seek, but which is so difficult to achieve convincingly.

The new planting is well spread across the seasons, so that, in autumn, the *Sedums* come into their own along with the universally successful *Aster x frikartii* Mönch, overseen by big specimens of *Hydrangea Annabel*—we are entering the golden age of hydrangeas, and long may it continue—and such good-value shrubs as the smoke bush, *Cotinus coggygria*. Pushing up through the mixture here and there are the old favourite Japanese anemones, especially the

Here is the sort of interplay between stone and water we see in illustrations of medieval *jardins d’amour* ;

refreshingly lovely *Anemone Honorine Jobert*, glistening white and precious, a living reproach to my periodic sniffiness about the invasiveness of these plants.

Stepping away to the north-east, we enter a little hedged enclosure focused on a square pool with a fountain in the centre. This is one of several pieces of stonework in the garden made by Redwood Stone. It is a traditional enough design in the main, a shaft of stone rising from the pool to support into a sort of flat octagonal capital, hollowed out for a shallow basin, but then things get clever. The water is returned to the pool by a set of short copper pipes, one in each vertical face of the capital, making a memorably pretty pattern as the water shoots evenly out of each pipe in an elegant curve.

Glowing autumnal colours erupt with *Cotinus coggygria* Royal Purple, foliage of Japanese acers, plumes of *Miscanthus* grasses and the pale violet flowers of *Aster x frikartii* Mönch

This is the sort of interplay of stone and water we see in illustrations of medieval *jardins d’amour*, with various damsels in attendance and an earnest youth plucking a lute in the background. A lot of the pleasure, as with all successful fountains, derives from the evenness of the flow from the various pipes, a product of the perfectly level setting of the stonework.

This is no easy task, and reflects great credit on Brian Hussey, who could give up his calling as a swimming-pool engineer tomorrow and become the Tommaso Ghinucci of the 21st century. Like Ghinucci’s work in 16th-century Italy, the work here is so well made ➤



Above: A broad turf path runs the length of an avenue of pleached trees underplanted with lavender hedging in the time-honoured way. A fountain at the far end draws the visitor across the grass. Left: The bubbling waters of the mill race, spanned by a timber bridge

And then, in a further field of two acres, we find the new wildflower meadow, full, like all young meadows, of ox-eye daisy, which will gradually thin in the coming years to reveal the rich variety of flowering perennials now building up their crowns in the ground beneath.

‘ A little colony of kingfishers flits along the banks of the ancient mill race ,

and maintained that we can expect to enjoy its pleasures indefinitely.

The planting is also all in perfect order, thanks to Sarah May and Alice Cherry, the fetchingly named gardeners who put it all in the ground to the Acres Wild plan and come in once a week, and Chris Collinson, who has been tending the grounds here for 25 years. Gardeners are always in short supply, and Mr and Mrs Hughes-Morgan are wise to retain the services of those who did a good job in the first place.

Beyond this enclosure, we step over a timber bridge to reach a big pond, verging on lakedom, another benefit of the ancient mill race. A sheet of still water requires just the sort of calm planting of marginal trees we find here, adding to the reflections in the water. The odd tree out is a eucalyptus, a beautiful object in itself, but rather lost here, as if it had wandered in from some alien habitat. It would be an act of cruelty to cut it down, but it could be made to feel more at home with some low planting around its base.

That ground, as shown by the various molehills here and there, is nothing more than soft, pale-brown sand, suitable for building castles and laying bricks. It must be the easiest soil in England to cultivate, although, of course, there are downsides. It seems surprising to find this ridiculously free-draining medium interspersed with sheets of water and the rise and fall of the mill race, with its resident population of darting kingfishers, but that is the character of Millwater, an ancient garden now overlaid with its latest lattice of planting and coming on nicely. 🐟